

# Setting the Stage for the Next 175 Years: United States and Thai Relations Renewed

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## The Obamark Connection

While everyone in the world now knows the name Obama, perhaps only about 65 million people are familiar with “Obamark.” Like many Thais, Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has a nickname, Mark, given to him by his parents. After Barack Obama won the democratic nomination, Abhisit’s supporters in Thailand began calling their man Obamark to draw attention to the perceived similarities between the two men: both are young, highly educated, well-spoken politicians who each promised their countries change. And as fate would have it, both men have assumed the mantle of leadership at the same time: Abhisit was endorsed by the King of Thailand and became Prime Minister on December 17, 2008, only a few weeks after Barack Obama won the election to become President of the United States.

President Obama’s election victory was enthusiastically received by the Thais. Like many embassies around the world, we held an election watch party to follow the polling results live as they came in from the other side of the world. Nearly 2,000 attendees—including 1,100 students—attended what became a loud, boisterous and festive event. Both the Governor of Bangkok and then Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat hand-delivered their congratulations after the final results were announced. Before the inauguration, the Embassy initially distributed 3,000 copies of a Thai language booklet on the President-Elect that was originally published in English by the State Department. But demand was so high for this booklet that we had to print another 5,000 copies to send to our contacts in government, industry, universities, libraries and media.

I don’t know if Prime Minister Abhisit is bothered by the comparison or by his new nickname; I suspect that he probably feels flattered. But one thing I am sure of is that the convergence of these events has brought a sense of renewed energy to our bilateral relationship. The Thai enthusiasm for our new president, coupled with the similar dynamism and youthful vigor found in their Prime Minister, has set the stage for a re-invigorated relationship just as the two countries celebrate 176 years of partnership.

## History of US-Thai Relations

The vast geographical distance between our two countries belies a deep and enduring partnership in countless spheres. Last year marked the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of formal relations between the United States and Thailand born from the Treaty of Amity and Commerce that was signed on March 20, 1833. The Treaty of 1833 was America’s first treaty with any Asian country, making Thailand America’s oldest diplomatic and trading partner in the region.

One of the best-known anecdotes from this long and enduring friendship is that of the offer of elephants to fight in the Civil War extended by the King of Thailand to President Abraham Lincoln. It is true that King Rama IV did send a letter to the President offering to send Thai elephants to the United States, though it was James Buchanan at the time, and the elephants were to aid with our development and not to fight a war. With mail service quite a bit slower than it is today, the original letter took so long to get to the United States that Buchanan's successor, President Lincoln responded, kindly thanking His Majesty but declining the offer.

During the era of British and French colonial expansion in Southeast Asia, King Rama V invited American advisors to serve in his government and give their views on how to best balance the influence of the European powers. However, given the great physical distance between our two countries, and the slower modes of travel at that time, America's engagement with Thailand was understandably limited during that era.

The Second World War significantly changed the nature of our bilateral relationship. To counter the Japanese occupation of Thailand, the United States supported a small number of brave freedom fighters—the Seri Thai, or “Free Thai”—who were dedicated to defeating the occupiers and their supporters. This brought us closer together, and in the early post-War world, the United States demonstrated its confidence in Thailand by supporting the resumption of Thailand's full sovereignty over its pre-War territories and its admission to the United Nations—even though some of our closest allies opposed both.

Our relationship strengthened further during the Cold War. From Thailand, the “Domino Theory” was more than an academic debating topic; it looked very real and very nearby. Thai soldiers were our comrades in arms during the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and their country became host to US military bases.

### The Relationship Today

The scope of the US-Thai relationship today is extensive—one of the most wide-ranging bilateral relationships I have ever seen; that is reflected in an embassy which is one of the world's largest, with over 600 American and 1,300 Thai employees. The United States is Thailand's second-largest trading partner after Japan; our trade totals over US\$ 32 billion per year and accumulated investment is estimated at over US\$ 23 billion. Twenty percent of mission personnel work on public health and disease issues; American and Thai researchers work side by side to combat malaria, dengue fever, and HIV/AIDS.

Thailand is also one of the United States' five major non-NATO treaty allies in the region, and our partnership has helped keep this region secure and stable. Our military forces engage in several training programs throughout the year aimed at maintaining regional peace and security. For almost three decades, Thailand has hosted COBRA GOLD, one of the largest land-based, joint, combined military training exercises in the world. COBRA GOLD started out as a bilateral exercise, but has grown today to include Japan, Indonesia and Singapore as full participants and dozens of other countries as official observers.

This joint military training also ensures that the region is adequately prepared for humanitarian disasters. Nothing illustrates the importance or the potential of our military relationship than our cooperation after the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Within hours of that tragedy, Americans and Thai officials agreed to set up a regional assistance hub at Utapao Naval Air Station. That facility served as the command and logistics center for the regional assistance effort. This experience inspired US, Thai, and other key actors in the region to work on improving our collective ability to respond to crises. That experience was put to the test in May 2008, when Cyclone Nargis slammed into Burma with the full fury of 135 mph winds, killing as many as 200,000 people. With our experience with the tsunami still fresh, the Thai government readily allowed US military forces already positioned in Thailand for COBRA GOLD to use Thailand as a staging area to deliver much-needed aid into Burma.

The enduring close relationship between the United States and Thailand is also based on and strengthened by personal ties. There is considerable travel between our two countries. Thailand ranks tenth globally in the number of students it sends to study in the United States. In fact, His Majesty King Bhumibol was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, just across the Charles River from Boston. At that time, his father, Prince Mahidol, was studying at Harvard Medical School.

Thailand and the United States work collaboratively on a number of other bilateral issues with regional ramifications. We have a successful track record of stemming the tide of the illegal narcotics trade—first heroin trafficking and now methamphetamines. We jointly run the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in Bangkok, providing training and connections between professional law enforcement people throughout this region to combat transnational crime and to strengthen the rule of law. And many US agencies working in Southeast Asia—including USAID—have their regional headquarters in Bangkok. We appreciate very much this graciousness from our hosts, making it possible for us to carry on so much of our work all over Asia.

#### Towards the Future: Challenge and Opportunity

During the long history of our relationship, the United States and Thailand have each dealt with serious challenges and without a doubt there will be more challenges ahead. The political tensions in Thailand were illustrated by the November 2008 seizure of Suvarnabhumi and Don Muang international airports. While acts of civil protest are common and expected in democracies, the forced closure of these two airports hurt both Thai and international business and shook investor confidence.

The Embassy's first responsibility, of course, was and is to ensure the safety of the tens of thousands of Americans living and traveling in Thailand. We were also mindful of the plight of American businesses suddenly unable to export or import goods and services. Embassy staff worked closely with American travelers and business people to resolve urgent issues, of course, and we also maintained our close contact and cooperation with our Thai counterparts. Fortunately, Thai institutions proved their flexibility and strength in

seeing the country through the turmoil, and the change of governments took place within the framework of the constitution.

We also face serious challenges on the economic front. The financial meltdown that began in New York, has led to trade and economic troubles worldwide. Our Thai friends have noted similarities with the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 and have shared with us lessons learned. We now must work together to make sure that protectionism does not choke off the rebound in trade necessary to recovering the prosperity that we all seek.

Despite the political and economic tensions that our countries now face, the core values at the bedrock of our relationship will endure: Thais and Americans alike hold the ideas of political liberty and economic freedom dear to their hearts. For these reasons and more, Thailand is our oldest friend, partner and ally in Asia. And while the last 175 years brought us to our strong relationship today, future generations of young people will shape and define the next 175 years. In his first address to the joint session of Congress on February 24, President Obama said, “As we stand at this crossroads of history, the eyes of all people in all nations are once again upon us—watching to see what we do with this moment; waiting for us to lead.” In Thailand, those people include the 1,100 students who gathered with their American friends one early morning in November to see the election results for themselves and cheer America’s new president.